Manhattan Project II

Caging the beast unleashed half a century ago

BY DANIEL ELLSBERG

Common sense tells us that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War have delivered humanity from the threat of nuclear war that held us in thrall for almost half a century. But common sense is wrong. One phase of the nuclear age—the period of superpower arms race and confrontation—has indeed come to a close, but another phase is about to accelerate: the era of nuclear proliferation and possible regional nuclear war.

With each month and year that the major nuclear powers maintain large arsenals, postpone a full test ban, and sustain nuclear policies that suggest that these weapons convey major-power status and are useful for political and military purposes, other nations can only conclude that acquiring and in some circumstances using nuclear weapons may be in their national interest.

In 1990, a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir was narrowly averted, and little has happened since to reduce the prospect of a recurrence. Although the risk of nuclear war between the members of NATO and the former Warsaw Pact powers has virtually vanished, the chance that some nuclear weapons will kill humans somewhere may be higher than ever before.

Averting that catastrophe depends on many contingencies, including the activities of those inside and outside of government who believe that the era of nuclear danger should end now—that it must and can end now, whether or not total physical abolition of all nuclear weapons proves quickly attainable.

Such an end has not yet been assured, despite the momentum of the "disarmament race" initiated in the last year of his Administration by President Bush and joined by Presidents Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Welcome as they are, neither their moves and proposals nor, as yet, policies of President Clinton show a decisive shift away from Cold War notions of the functions and requirements for nuclear weapons in superpower arsenals. None adopts an appropriate posture from which to discourage proliferation.

In fact, the initial, dismaying proposal by a Clinton Administration task force was to negotiate a "comprehensive" test "ban" that would permit nuclear testing into the next century up to the level of a one-kiloton yield—a disingenuous scheme that clearly violated existing legislation and was killed by Congressional outrage. At this writing Clinton has not decided on a subsequent plan, pushed by State and Defense officials, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the nuclear-weapons laboratories, to resume U.S. nuclear weapons testing until 1996, for palpably thin reasons, at the cost of restarting Russian, French, and British testing. These proposals suggest that the new Administration is giving no real priority to opposing proliferation, despite its lip service to that goal.

As yet, the Clinton Administration shows no more willingness than its predecessors to seek an end to proliferation by accepting the same restraints on its own behavior—and that of other nuclear states—that it proposes for states accepting nonnuclear status under the Nonproliferation Treaty. Many of the discriminatory distinctions between nuclear and nonnuclear states under the Nonproliferation Treaty are outmoded and dangerous to world security, and should be eliminated. The United States should lead the nuclear states in renouncing such "privileges," not by seeking to amend the Treaty but by supplementing it with new multilateral commitments and agreements banning nuclear testing, first-use threats, and the development or acquisition of new nuclear weapons. We should also press for international monitoring of all nuclear facilities.

At present, every nuclear state—the United States and Russia above all, but the lesser nuclear states as well—maintains nuclear arsenals far above what could reasonably be regarded as minimal deterrent levels even by Cold War standards. We must come to see the existence of such stockpiles as a threatening and urgent international problem, akin to global warming and ozone depletion, that needs to be dealt with cooperatively by humanity as a whole, led by the countries that are themselves the greatest contributors to the problem.

Only if the United States acts decisively and consistently on such a reconceptualization can we ask any other countries to forgo nuclear weapons altogether, ask other nuclear states to restrain their buildup or cease using nuclear threats, or expect effective international collaboration on enforcement. We cannot hope for any of these—or exert effective leadership in an international effort to stop proliferation—so long as we continue to test new nuclear warheads, insist on our freedom to initiate nuclear warfare, and maintain grossly excessive arsenals.

To be effective, we need a dramatic and comprehensive package of coordinated changes in policies and programs among current nuclear states, expressing a fundamental change in our relation to nuclear weapons. Designing such a package requires informed discussion and analysis, agreement on priorities, and assignment of tasks and schedules. It will take a focused effort of the highest urgency.

The main precedent for that kind of effort in the United States is the very one that launched the nuclear era: the Manhattan Project. This is pre-

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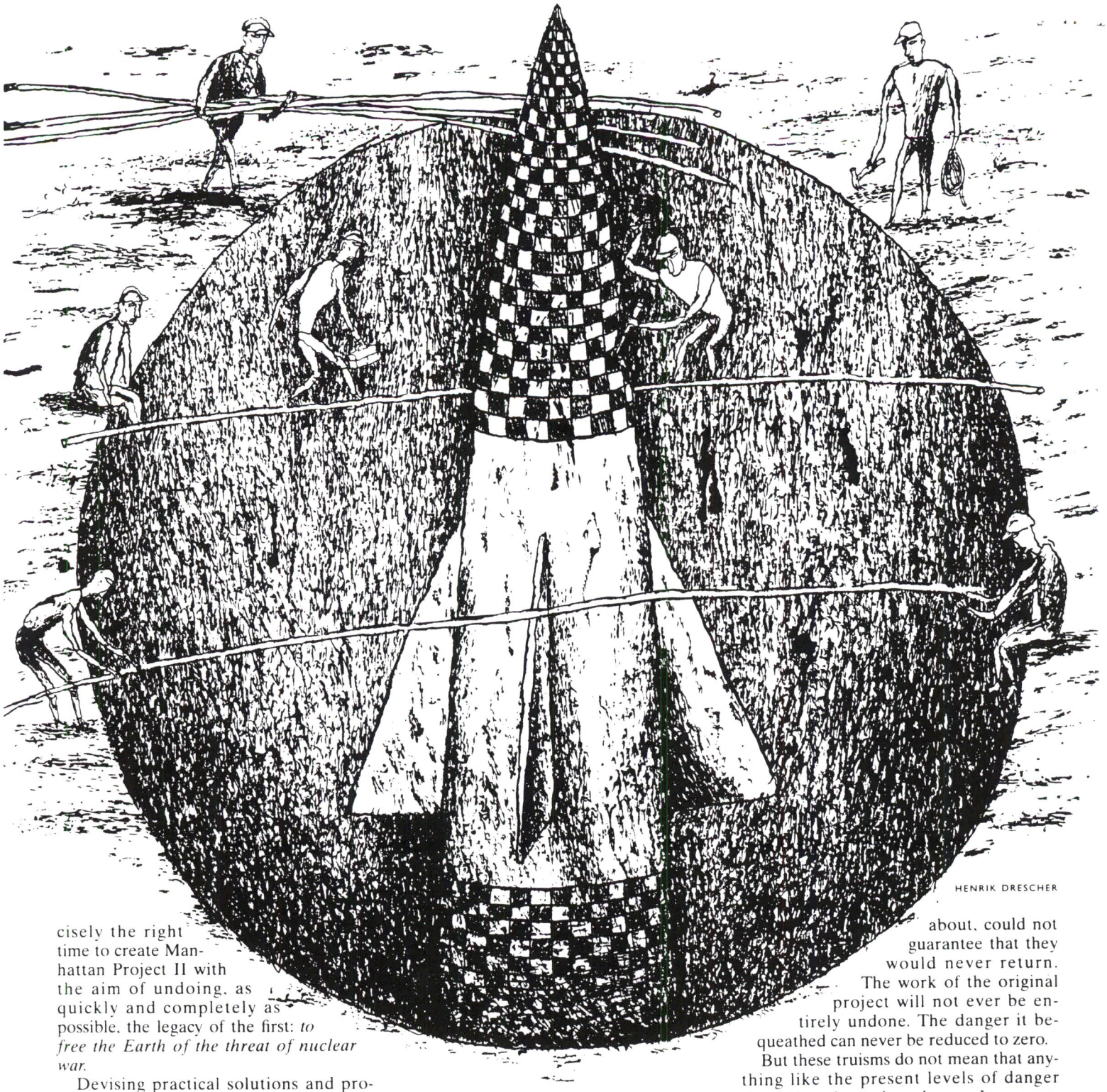

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cisely the right time to create Manhattan Project II with the aim of undoing, as quickly and completely as possible, the legacy of the first: *to free the Earth of the threat of nuclear war.*

Devising practical solutions and programs for freeing the world from nuclear threats and ridding it of most or all of its nuclear weapons has more varied political, psychological, and physical dimensions than the original project. It faces even more obstacles. It is the very complexity and interdisciplinary nature of these tasks, along with their importance and urgency, that suggests the model of the Manhattan Project.

In contrast to the original, the new project would need to be overt and international, and it would need to include Third World participants. Ideally, it would be a high-priority project of governments from the start. But since the U.S. Government has not yet shown a commitment to the goals above, the first task is to address how to bring about societal and ultimately Executive Branch understanding of (and consensus on) its goals and programs. It will take more, this time, than the equivalent of an Einstein-Szilard letter to President Roosevelt. There is no time to lose.

Manhattan Project II cannot uninvent nuclear weapons. It cannot prevent later-generation weapons if development and testing, once ended, should later be resumed. Even physical elimination of all existing weapons, if that should come about, could not guarantee that they would never return. The work of the original project will not ever be entirely undone. The danger it bequeathed can never be reduced to zero.

But these truisms do not mean that anything like the present levels of danger should be tolerated any longer. In a meaningful sense, *near-abolition* of nuclear weapons—95-to-99 per cent dismantlement of current stockpiles—is an appropriate goal to be achieved by the end of this century. Radical, decisive transformations of the status quo can start this year. It is too early to take abolition as an immediate goal, one that defines the project and measures its worth and success. But it is not too early to be addressing the question seriously.

From the outset, the long-run tasks of the project must include an effort to explore the conditions that could *make* a

world of zero nuclear weapons feasible.

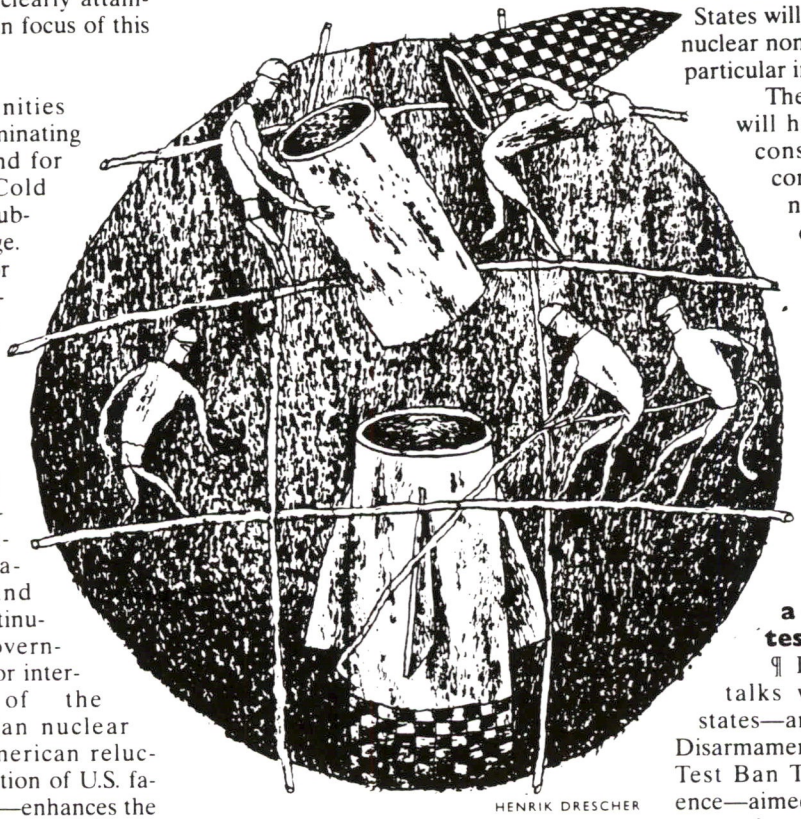
These requirements would include radical transformations of the international environment, in terms of increased trust, cooperation, acceptable surveillance, limitations on the claims of national sovereignty, and the effective disappearance of war and preparation for war as a legitimate and expected activity of states. That is not a way of saying that abolition should be ruled out "for the foreseeable future," or put off for many generations. On the contrary, it seems likely that there will be no truly long-run human future without it, and that therefore a way must be found to make the required transformations ultimately practical. However, long before consensus on the conditions for total abolition is likely, other goals of the utmost importance are clearly attainable. These must be the main focus of this project.

The current opportunities for reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons, and for changing long-standing Cold War nuclear policies, are subject to erosion and challenge. They are not permanent. For example, there is a continuing danger of a shift to a more authoritarian, militarist regime within Russia which—even if it did not lead to a new Cold War and arms race—would close the present window of opportunity for greatly increased trust and cooperation, openness to international inspection, and reductions in arms. The continuing failure of the U.S. Government to press for bilateral or international inspection of the dismantlement of Russian nuclear weapons—because of American reluctance to accept such inspection of U.S. facilities on a reciprocal basis—enhances the danger, day by day, that fissionable materials from Russia will eventually feed proliferation and possible nuclear terrorism.

Recent events in Russia and other former Soviet republics only serve to underscore and intensify this warning. The START II treaty signed last year by Presidents Bush and Yeltsin is under increasing attack in Russian political and military circles. As in the United States, the nuclear laboratories in Russia are pressing the case for resumption of nuclear testing with new vigor. Nuclear materials—as yet, only in minor amounts—have indeed begun to depart covertly from the former Soviet republics.

Perhaps most ominously, military voices are being heard for a "resuscitation" of nuclear weapons in Russia—and for their retention in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, which would doom the START agreements—as a cheaper way "to defend far-flung frontiers." That could point to the tacit revocation of the "no-first-use" commitments made by all the former Soviet republics, and to a sustained deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Russia that could lead ultimately, in the event of conflict within the former Soviet Union, to what former Secretary of State James Baker called, "Yugoslavias with nukes."

The first steps taken by Bush, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin, important as they were, stopped short of measures that could decisively lock in reciprocal reductions, make them irreversible and verifiable, and avert the dangers described above. For example, they failed to provide for reciprocal bilateral inspection and safeguards on weapons to be dismantled and the nuclear materials removed from such weapons. Nor did they bring U.S. nuclear policies on testing and on first-use threats into line with Russia's pressure for a comprehensive test ban and commitment against first-use, thus forging a superpower consensus which—joined by other nuclear states—could reduce worldwide incentives to acquire nuclear weapons.



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President Bill Clinton should, therefore, bring about a comprehensive package of changes in U.S. policies and proposals for multilateral action that would embody his repeated assertions that he sees the prevention of nuclear proliferation and nuclear wars as a matter of the utmost concern for U.S. national interests. Congress, in turn, should work with the new Administration to carry out the initiatives for reducing nuclear weapons begun by President Bush.

In short, both the Administration and Congress should adopt the aims and concrete proposals below of Manhattan Project II: giving the tasks of ending proliferation and eliminating the threat of nuclear war the same urgency and priority from 1993 to 1995—and beyond—as marked the original Manhattan Project, which built the world's first atomic weapons between 1943 and 1945.

The measures proposed below constitute not a "wish list" but a comprehensive package of mutually reinforcing steps that can realistically be initiated in the next twelve months. If these measures are undertaken on an urgent basis, the United States will have gone far to strengthen a nuclear nonproliferation regime that is of particular importance.

The nuclear policies that follow will help to develop a new set of consensual international norms concerning nuclear weapons—a new consensus on a single set of standards applying to all, progressively eliminating most current discriminatory distinctions between nuclear and nonnuclear states. That, in turn, will help eliminate the conflict between our declared aims of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation and our own actual operating policies.

1. Seek a comprehensive test ban by 1995.

¶ In 1993, initiate five-power talks with the declared nuclear states—and parallel discussions in the Disarmament Conference and the Partial Test Ban Treaty Amendment Conference—aimed at completing a multilateral comprehensive test ban as soon as possible, to take effect, at the latest, by the opening of the 1995 renewal conference for the Nonproliferation Treaty.

¶ Maintain the U.S. testing moratorium while test-ban negotiations proceed, assuming that Russia also observes its present commitment not to test if the United States does not.

2. Seek a verified ban on production of weapons-usable fissile materials.

¶ Negotiate a verifiable, reciprocally or internationally inspected treaty commitment with Russia to end permanently the production of fissile materials for weapons, and seek comparable commitments from other nuclear states. Agree to place all nuclear installations under safe-

guards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

¶ Initiate international talks aimed at the phasing out of production of weapons-usable fissile materials—plutonium or highly enriched uranium—for any purposes including civilian energy or research, and at placing all such materials worldwide under international safeguards.

¶ Increase funding by the United States and others of the IAEA, especially its capabilities for inspection, and move to strengthen U.N. Security Council procedures for backing up the inspection process and bringing international sanctions to bear on violators.

3. Continue deep cuts and accelerate deactivation.

¶ Encourage the ratification in 1993 of START I by Ukraine and of the START II treaty by Russia.

¶ Bring various international inducements and pressures to bear on Ukraine and Kazakhstan to carry out their Lisbon Protocol agreements to enter the Nonproliferation Treaty as nonnuclear states and to see that the strategic nuclear weapons now within their borders are dismantled on an accelerated schedule.

¶ Reaffirm intent to preserve the antiballistic-missile treaty, strictly interpreted, as the prerequisite to deep cuts.

¶ Seek agreement to dismantle all warheads and missiles removed from service under START I, START II, and unilateral undertakings. This agreement might usefully be hastened by the U.S. declaring its intention to carry this out unilaterally—inviting Russia to verify this commitment through on-site inspections—while encouraging Russian reciprocation.

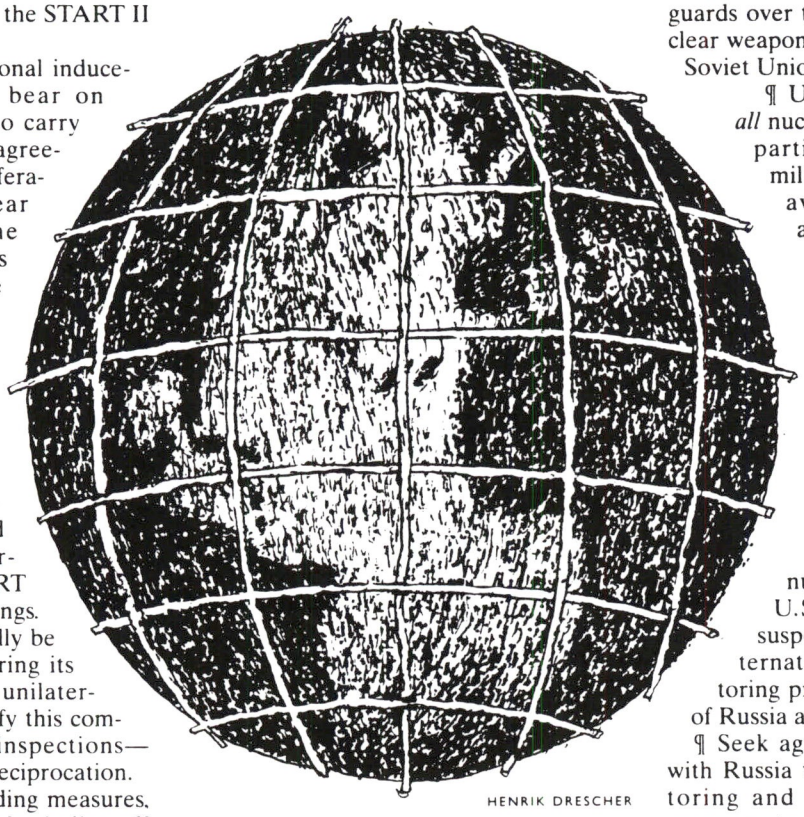
¶ Pursue confidence-building measures, including taking land-based missiles off alert and adopting zonal restrictions on submarine patrols and antisubmarine-warfare operations.

¶ Seek greatly accelerated implementation of START I and START II reductions, along with verified dismantling of warheads and missiles to be reduced and safeguarding of fissile materials. Meanwhile, *deactivation* can take place quickly—in contrast to total warhead dismantling and destruction, which is a prolonged process—by removing warheads from missiles, removing MX missiles from their silos, converting strategic bombers to perform conventional missions only, and deactivating warhead cores by various means. By such measures the United States could reduce operational strategic forces down to START II levels within one year, inviting the Russians to match these moves as fast as they are physically capable and offering to provide financial and technical assistance to this end.

¶ Declare the U.S. intention to follow START II ratification immediately with START III negotiations aiming at a lower intermediate ceiling for strategic forces in the range of 1,000 to 2,000 warheads for the United States and Russia, along with discussions with other nuclear states aiming at establishing lower ceilings for their forces, to be followed by further and continuing multilateral reductions.

4. Commit to a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons.

¶Join Russia and China in committing to the principle of no first use of nuclear weapons, and reject and condemn threats of such use under any circumstances. Seek comparable commitments from Britain and France.



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¶ Seek to establish under the U.N. Security Council a universal prohibition against such initiation or threats, backed up by agreement to take joint action against violators of this ban.

5. Pursue a bilateral 'zero option' for tactical nuclear weapons.

¶ Withdraw from deployment—in consultation with NATO allies—the remaining (air-launched) U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and elsewhere.

¶ Initiate negotiations with the Russians toward a verified "zero option" for tactical nuclear weapons (as earlier, for intermediate-range nuclear weapons), eliminating all such weapon systems worldwide and dismantling their nuclear warheads, under bilateral safeguards.

¶ Move toward the verified implementation of this agreement (or joint undertaking) as quickly as possible, to minimize the risk of loss, theft, transfer, or actual use of Russian tactical weapons as a result of possible breakdown of authority within Russia or conflict within or on the borders of the former Soviet Union.

6. Offer reciprocity to achieve bilateral or international safeguards.

¶ Seek bilateral or international safeguards over the maximum quantity of nuclear weapons and materials in the former Soviet Union on a reciprocal basis.

¶ Urge verifiable registration of *all* nuclear weapons in the world. In particular, funds from the U.S. military budget should be made available for the registering and "tagging," as quickly as possible, of all nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union, using existing technical means, first simply to number them and then to establish and record a tamper-proof "fingerprint" for each nuclear weapon, for purposes of accounting control and monitoring of disposition.

¶ Register and tag all U.S. nuclear weapons and open all U.S. nuclear and nuclear-suspected facilities to the same international verification and monitoring procedures that are demanded of Russia and other nuclear states.

¶ Seek agreement as soon as possible with Russia to establish reciprocal monitoring and controls over all nuclear weapons to be dismantled whether by agreement or by unilateral undertakings, and place under international safeguards the transport, storage, and disposition of all fissile materials from dismantled weapons. Make comparable agreements with Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus if they elect to have strategic weapons dismantled within their territories.

The original Manhattan Project of 1942 designed and delivered a bomb in three years. The initiatives and commitments above can and should be undertaken within the next twelve to twenty-four months, and carried out by the end of the decade. If we complete Manhattan Project II by the year 2000, we will substantially end the era of nuclear threats with the millennium.■